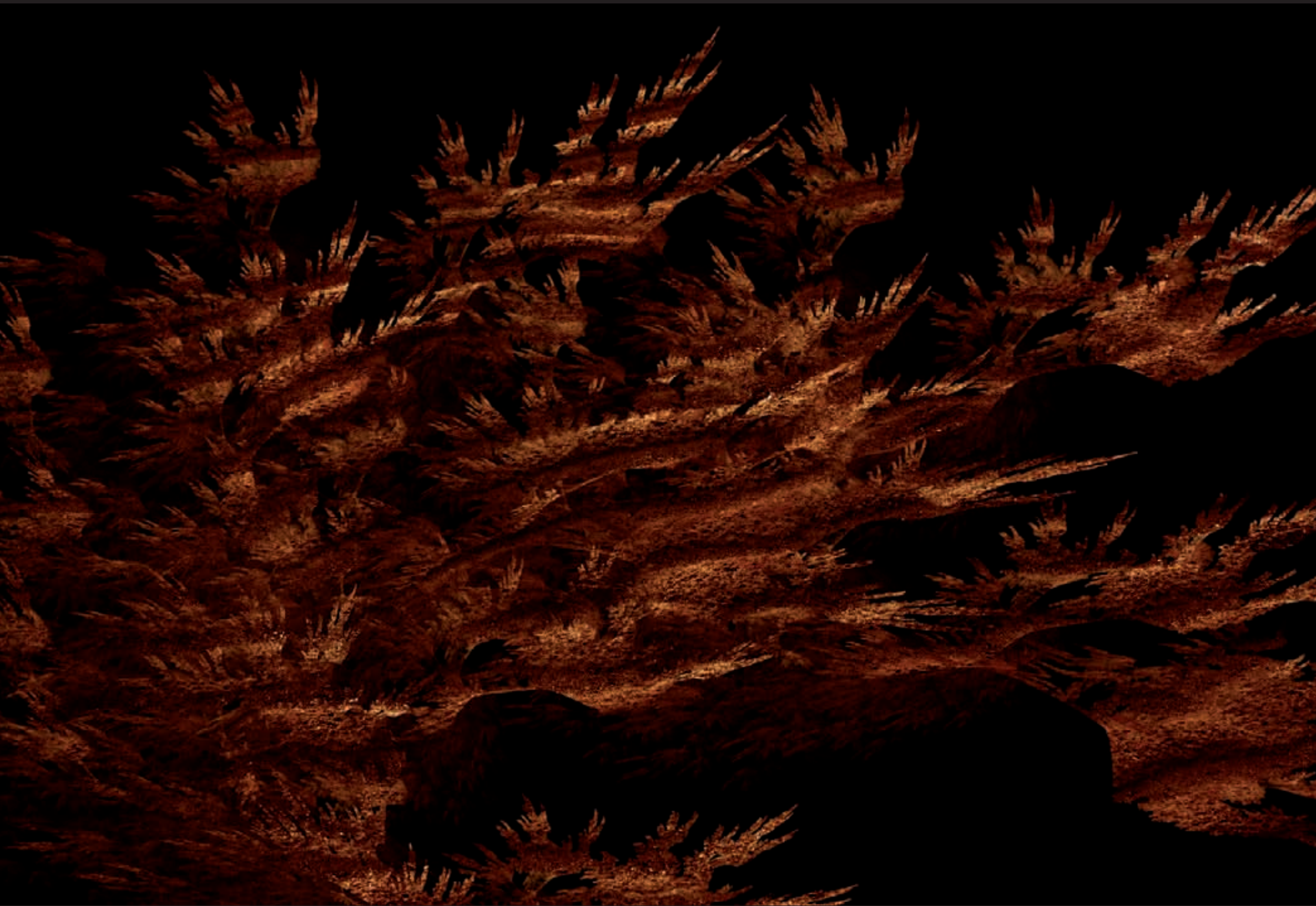
REASON TO WRITE



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SECTION II

ANALYSIS

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

ARRANGEMENT

CHAPTER 5

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1 TWO PRINCIPLES TO ANALYSIS

Once a writer has established and refined a critical question, the next step is to begin to answer that question. In many cases, however, when a person is confronted with a question, there is a certain tendency to answer that question right away—even if the person who answers is not sure that the answer being offered is actually true, or is simply a guess. In other words, when it comes to answers, people tend to be in a hurry.

Being in a hurry makes a short paper and a shallow answer. Snap judgments sum up an issue and make an instant decision: right/wrong, good/bad, loved it/hated it. It will cause the writer to draw conclusions before the writer has really found out what is going on.

A question worth asking has to be answered carefully, and that means the writer has got to suspend judgment long enough to perform a thoughtful analysis. This analysis will eventually serve as the body of the essay; it provides the step-by-step chain of reasoning by which a writer outlines his or her conclusions, to a reader. A part of critical thinking is recognizing that analysis takes time. If it didn't, everyone would have all the answers, right away.

The first answer that pops into one's mind is probably not the best answer, because we draw knee-jerk conclusions from that part of our evaluative cognitive processes that stores prejudgments and cultural ideology. The impulse to answer a question right away is exactly what a writer must resist, in this case.

In the relationship between critical thinking and analysis, there are two fundamental principles to follow, and they are counterintuitive:

- **All Analysis Begins with the Obvious**

  This is probably the single most important principle to follow when performing analysis on a question. Analysis is painstaking and exhaustive, and the answer to a given question lies not in searching for broad truths, but in discovery of patterns that arise from breaking down the object of analysis into its constituent parts. One should begin with the most obvious elements. This means that: 1) One must pretend that there is no such thing as the obvious; 2) One must proceed as if nothing is without significance.

  Analysis of detail is what make critical thinking look like a magic trick. For any single detail that we take for granted, or dismiss as a given, or ignore, we

lose an opportunity for insight. The most critically cogent analyses occur not because the writer found some obscure fact that others missed. Rather, it is because *most people routinely miss the obvious*.

- **The Best Analysis is done by Extra-Terrestrials**

  A vital part of critical thinking as it applies to analysis is integrating the notion of the need to work around what you think you already know. To really perform analysis, one must readjust one's pattern of thinking and approach a question with an attitude of deliberate ignorance, as if one has never encountered it before. One must pretend one doesn't understand a darned thing about it.

  This is a critical thinking tool that generates what is called a ***defamiliarization effect***. Answers to questions often only come after we bypass the filters we have in place that offer easily accessible answers. In other words, good critical writers look at a question as if they just stepped off of the Mothership.

> **DEFINITION**
>
> **defamiliarization effect**: from art and literary theory, a moment of sudden insight created by the denaturalization of a common experience or typical way of understanding something.

Of course, offering such general principles are fine, in theory, but without an example, they to end up filed in our brains somewhere under:

> "I'll burn that bridge when I come to it."

The previous statement could stand in as an example of an effect of *defamiliarization*, because it combines two idiomatic sayings.

The first is "to burn one's bridges," meaning: *to act in a way that produces consequences one cannot undo*.

The second is "to cross that bridge when one comes to it," meaning: *to delay working through an issue or idea until it becomes a matter of urgency*.

The combination of the two could mean, then: "To delay understanding until that delay cannot be undone."

Therefore, in the interest of arguing for delay in coming to an answer when performing analysis, and in the interest of arguing against delay in understanding why, a better example would be one in which something familiar would be presented as if one did not already understand it.

The following example is drawn from philosopher Jacques Derrida, concerning what he has to say about something as simple and straightforward as a **gift**. So, what are the three most *obvious* things that can be said, in general, about a gift? They could be:

- A gift is an object or service transferred from one person to another...
- ...with no expectation of anything in return, such as payment or compensation...
- ...often meant to convey affection

In other words, most people, if asked the question: "What is a gift?" would immediately offer the answer: "Usually, it's something you give to someone else, for free, most of the time because you are fond of that person."

If one were to perform analysis on this *familiar* way of understanding what a gift is, one might come to a different series of conclusions regarding what we think we know about a gift. To begin to create a *defamiliarization effect* in relationship to what we think we know about a gift, imagine the following situation:

> You give a gift to your friend. Without explanation, your friend takes it and immediately turns around and walks away.

What kind of reaction is this most likely to produce in the one who gives the gift? One would anticipate that most people would feel, at the very least, hurt, if not angry.

That is because we all know, if we slow down and think about it, that we actually do expect something in return for a gift, even if it is an expression of gratitude. This implies that gifts are not, in fact, something that one gives away for free, but rather something for which one expects something, in return.

Of course, saying "thank you" hardly seems like equal compensation for goods or services. However, that is because we have not yet dealt with the issue of receiving a gift, and, in doing so, incurring *debt*. Here is another situation:

> You approach your neighbor to ask if she can watch your dog while you spend a few days out of town. She cheerfully agrees to do so. You spend the time away, and return to find your dog well-fed, exercised, groomed, and in good spirits. You thank her.
>
> A month later, your neighbor calls to say that her regular dog sitter is ill, and she has plans to go out of town for over the weekend. She could cancel, but asks if you would mind taking care of her dog while she is away. You tell her you have plans to go to a new restaurant in town, and regretfully and politely refuse.

Again, the question becomes: what would be the anticipated reaction in such a scenario? If gifts are given without expectation of return, then you would not feel guilty in refusing, and your neighbor would not feel resentment at your refusal. Yet the more likely reaction would be one of guilt, on the one hand, and resentment, on the other. Nobody is going to kneecap anyone, but these are both signs of a debt that has not been honored.

What this means, then, is not only that we expect others to say "thank you" when we give them something, but also that the act of saying "thank you" usually translates roughly into: "I owe you, and you can collect at your leisure." Here is another situation:

> It is graduation day, and two students who have spent some time together outside of class meet at the ceremony. Student 1 gives student 2 a concert t-shirt from a band they both like. Student 2 gives Student 1 a new sportscar.

Even if Student 2 were wealthy enough to give new cars away, at random, the gift creates a radically unequal debt, one that Student 1 would probably find difficult to repay.

People foolish enough to gift cars to casual acquaintances would probably find that, in a shallow relationship, the recipient may be perfectly willing to drive away in her or his new car, and never look back. However, the gift would still be perceived as radically inappropriate. It would probably signal either an emotional attachment that is inappropriately excessive and probably unreturned, or a sign of mental imbalance.

If a relationship is not a deep relationship (as between spouses, or family members), people can be suspicious of extravagant gifts, and even outright refuse them, for fear of incurring gift-debt they cannot repay. They may be apprehensive that they would be asked to repay in a way that they would otherwise not willingly choose.

Even in a deep relationship, such as a close friendship, routine unequal gift-giving can create an interpersonal crisis, especially if one person in the relationship is capable of giving gifts of greater monetary value than the other, and actually does so. Whether deep or shallow, casual or obligatory, gift-giving usually must be precisely balanced, as in the following situation:

> Anna has very recently become casual friends with someone who she knows will also be celebrating Christmas, which is in a week or two. She is in a dilemma: If she gives her new friend a gift, and the new friend does not give her a gift, she could be embarrassed, having overstated the

> depth of the new friendship. If she does not give a gift, and her friend offers one, she could be embarrassed, and embarrass her new friend, having understated the potential depth of the friendship. So, like many people, she will be just anxious enough to purchase a small gift, and put it away, to present at the appropriate time, or not…just in case.

According to our original understanding of a gift, none of this makes sense. Are we not free to give whatever we want, of whatever value, without people finding us strange, or resenting us, if they are unable to give something of the same value in exchange? Are we not free to take a gift, and not "owe" its value, in return? Evidently, this is not the case. When words such as *debt* and *exchange* enter into the valuation of a gift, one is forced to face the idea of the gift as one that participates in an *economy*.

This, in turn, raises the immediate question: If there is actually an economy to a gift, what's the difference between a gift, and approaching a stranger standing behind a counter at the store to exchange your $1.50 for a candy bar?

In answer, one could say that a gift is involved in an economy of *altruistic reciprocity*. These are the terms one finds anthropologists using to describe the finely balanced social practices that involve the "free" transfer of goods or services that are actually carefully balanced exchanges dictated by unspoken social rules.

In anthropological textbooks, description of such reciprocal exchanges tend to sound as if those who engage in such practices are fully consciously of doing so, and even in a way that is coldly calculating. In this way, one can recognize that the description of such an economy, from the outside, differs radically from what it feels like to participate in such an economy, from the inside.

One could thus point out that this economy differs from market exchange because, while objects or services are exchanged, those objects or services really stand in for something else. They signal a quantity of emotional attachment. One gifts because one cares, and one is given gifts because one is cared for. In the exchange, one is reassured concerning the mutuality of the amount of caring by the equal exchange of the goods or services, which are actually secondary to the message of reciprocal emotional attachment.

In this way, through analysis, our understanding of a gift has altered from the one with which most of us were familiar. In becoming unfamiliar, we learn things about ourselves, and about gifts, about how the value of an object can indicate the depth of a feeling, and that description of cultures differs from the unconscious and emotionally charged participation in cultural practices by the persons within that culture.

Even with this new understanding, this analysis still leaves important questions unanswered, such as:

- Is there such a thing as a "gift" as we originally conceived it-one that is really "free"?
- Can we escape this economy of a gift?
- What if we give anonymously, or for charity? Does the satisfaction we receive, from doing so, compensate us?
- Would we escape this economy if we could forget that we had given a gift, and/or if we could ensure the recipient would forget? Would there be a point to giving, at all, if we were able to do so?
- Why do we all pretend there is no economy? Isn't that what happens when someone thanks us for a gift, and we respond with something like: "It's nothing," or: "Forget about it"?

2 OPINIONS, FACTS, AND ANALYSIS

To get to the hands-on "how to" of analysis that yields insights, one must also get through a second obstacle: the common misunderstanding that there are only two ways to produce conclusion: to offer opinions, or to cite facts found in secondary source material.

As should be clear, by now, an opinion, by definition, is based upon a subjective point of view, and relies upon such things as unsubstantiated taste or preference. The answer that someone will provide to a question, if opinion is being solicited, will depend entirely upon whom one asks. The statement "Blue is the prettiest color" is a statement of opinion, offered in response to the question: "What is the prettiest color?"

This question can be answered in many ways, because the truth is based upon subjective experience. This is why there is no place for opinion in the academic essay, which does not recognize such truth as valid in the context of knowledge acquisition.

A fact appears, at first, to be the only other option, because it serves as the opposite of opinion. A secondary-source fact is a statement that has already been established as verified by the rules that determine truth and validity within a given academic discourse.

A fact may be a statement such as: "The perception of color is caused by the refraction of light," offered in response to the question: "What causes the perception of color?" The library is full of established facts.

> **EVER WONDERED?**
>
> **Common vs. Specialized Knowledge**: This is a difficult rule to understand, because it depends upon both who is writing, and also to whom one is writing.
>
> In an undergraduate paper, written for an undergraduate journal, any specialized term in any given disciplinary field falls under specialized knowledge, and must be defined, and the source identified, even if the student, and/or students in general, would probably recognize the term.

A fact can also be ***common knowledge*** (e.g.: planets are spherical). If it is not common knowledge, an established fact is the product of someone else's published thinking and exploration on a question. Established facts make up secondary source material for a writer: the way in which others have looked at the same question that the writer is addressing.

This does lead some students to believe that, given that opinion is not an option for academic writing, their task is to answer a question by:

1. Assembling together, through secondary source research, as many established facts as possible that answer their question
2. Reassembling those facts into an essay form that reflects other people's answers to the student's question.

This is not an academic essay, or an academic research paper. It is a book report. A book report is designed to reflect what the student has learned about a given subject, from other writers. An academic essay is designed to reflect what the student has to teach other people about what the student has come to understand.

The idea that academic writing is based on either *opinion*, or *facts* creates a binary. Academic writing does not draw primarily on common knowledge or published secondary source material, and it is never drawn from opinion.

> **DEFINITION**
>
> **analysis**: the act of breaking an object/idea/question/issue down, into constituent parts, for the purpose of gaining knowledge about it.

The most fundamental way that people reason through a question, and establish the truth of the matter, and then write about it, is ***analysis***. Analysis is a form of reasoning, and not a statement of opinion. Academic writing always relies primarily on the writer's own analysis to move a question, through a logical progression, to an answer.

Academic writers may use secondary sources for a variety of purposes—to define terms, to show another writer to be in error, to reorient a question, to support a

smaller point, or just to situate the context of the question—but never, ever, for the purpose of answering the primary question. That wheel has already been invented. One cannot claim the ideas of others as one's own; it is one of the subtlest forms of plagiarism.

3 TYPES OF ANALYSIS: GENERAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter, we will cover the steps of general analysis, as well as two specific types of general analysis: Formalist Analysis, and Rhetorical Analysis.

People usually already know that, in general, analysis has nothing to do with facts memorized, and everything to do with acquiring a specific proficiency. While the following would be simplified, let's say that a scholar has a question. That question is:

> What force causes many objects to fall downward
> when dropped from a height?

Since Newton, and others, have already been so kind as to look into this question for us, we know that the answer to this question is, in part: "gravity."

Let's imagine, however, that we don't yet know the answer to the question: What force causes many objects to fall downward? Here's how we would use analysis to begin to answer that question.

Analysis begins with two steps, often called a *demonstration*.

> Step 1: Ask a question based upon an observation
>
> Step 2: Identify specific instances or samples or examples

Thus, our scientist may begin with the following:

> Step 1: Many objects fall downward when dropped. What force causes these objects to fall downward?
>
> Step 2: Rocks, eggs, cannon balls, and vases will fall downward when dropped from a height.

While these are important first steps to analysis, the analysis is, at this point, incomplete. The question as to what forces causes this downward motion has been posed, but has not yet been answered. This is a part of the problem with the five-paragraph form, which is drawn from *demonstration*: a statement of observation (objects fall downward) followed by examples that are treated as "proofs" (rocks, eggs, cannon